

BOOK REVIEW

Snarls from the Tea-tree: Big Cat Folklore

David Waldron and Simon Townsend

2012. Arcadia, North Melbourne, Victoria.

Reviewed by Chad Arment

One aspect of cryptozoology that I (and some other researchers) tend to harp on is that mystery animals must be studied with two lenses: a folkloric lens and a biological lens. All mystery animals are folkloric, whether or not they biological. Listening to witnesses, evaluating patterns, distinguishing mistaken identifications, even sorting out our own speculation, invariably involves folkloric interpretations that we may or may not recognize. There is far too much conclusion jumping in cryptozoology when it comes to promoting the biological reality of certain cryptids or specific identifications (i.e. favored theories). Worse, there is a false notion prevalent that pits folklore versus biology—that if stories of an alleged animal are “folklore,” then it cannot be an unknown species.

So, it is refreshing to see a book in which both sides are represented, providing a broader and more illuminating discussion of the controversy. This particular book tackles the phenomenon of “big cats” in southeast Australia. Now whether or not Australian Big Cats (ABCs) are cryptozoological (and I think a good case can be made that they are, unless we are going to dismiss *a priori* certain candidates), they certainly incorporate all of the features of a

cryptozoological mystery: allegations of a population of unknown species supported by often ambiguous or circumstantial physical and testimonial evidence, creating a distinctive presence in popular culture.

The two authors show the parallel sides of an investigation. Dr. David Waldron lectures in History and Anthropology at the University of Ballarat, and provides the folkloric perspective on these creature accounts. Simon Townsend is a big cat researcher (co-founder of Big Cats Victoria) with practical zoo experience, and discusses the scientific direction needed to investigate sightings and alleged kills.

Waldron discusses the big cat stories from their earliest accounts, noting personalities, major flaps, and the cultural fascination surrounding them. He delves into the folkloric origin stories (where the “pumas” and “panthers” may have come from) as well as folk knowledge (inaccuracies included) regarding these animals and their depredations. There are numerous points of tension where different perspectives find themselves in conflict: believers vs. skeptics, fact vs. embellishment, nature vs. society, etc. Each side brings their own interpretation of events and data, and as folk beliefs form and gel, these create an environment where similar beliefs proliferate, regardless of their accuracy.

Townsend introduces the reader to the scientific methodology behind cryptozoology, showing how it can be applied to gather and analyze forensic data. He then covers the types of evidence that have been linked to ABCs (including an honest evaluation of the contributory value of such evidence), the various candidates proposed as explanations to the problem, and the strategy that should be utilized when undertaking further field investigations

I think this volume is an excellent model for future books looking at cryptozoological problems. We’ve seen some cryptozoology books in recent years coming from sociological or anthropological perspectives, but they rarely have a solid (and objective) biological accompaniment. And, no surprise, most cryptozoology books don’t have a good grasp of the folkloric atmosphere that surrounds mystery animals. One doesn’t have to believe (or disbelieve) in

order to investigate—but we should certainly be aware of cultural influences on cryptozoological material.

This 190-page text includes index, endnotes, and a few photos. It should be of great interest to anyone interested in Australian cryptozoology, or the intersection of folklore and practical cryptozoological investigation. It can be acquired from certain Australian booksellers including Readings (www.readings.com.au) and Abbey's (www.abbey.com.au), or directly from Australian Scholarly Publishing (www.scholarly.info).